

CROSSROADS IN DIVERSITY

A Travel across Spaces of Academia

Kultúrák, kontextusok, identitások

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Ecowomanism and Womanist Theology*

Ecowomanism embodies an African American religio-cultural system of thought primarily within, but not limited to, the discipline of womanist theology. As the term suggests, it studies social, cultural, theological, and political phenomena in the intersection of an ecological, environmentalist as well as womanist standpoint, which subsumes the interrogation of issues related to ecojustice and ecospirituality. Much as it was launched in the beginning of the 21st century, signifying the renewed interest in pro-black reconfigurations of the black self and community, it centers on a tradition of womanist connectedness to the environment for spiritual, gendered, and socio-political, racial reasons—a tradition that leads back beyond the birth/coinage of womanism to African American Motherwit “passed on from generation to generation by African American females” (Carr-Hamilton 1996, 72) and crystalized in the works of early, 19th-century and beyond black female thinkers.

Womanism is conventionally traced back to Alice Walker’s 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, in which she identifies the term as culture-bound: “to be consistent with black cultural values (which, whatever their shortcomings, still have considerable worth) it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation” (1983, 81). In that, she seeks to establish “womanist” as a relational term expressing multimodal connectedness to the black community and black culture. Much as her inclusion of liberating, lesbian, sexual, and spiritual notions in the term allows for speculations, what is striking is its all-inclusive character from a female point of view in relation to black culture, actually thinking to debunk binary thinking, but not, in fact, reaffirming or pointing out any of the segments to narrow her definition—as it would work

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toward separation, something the term is positioned against. Walker refuses a reinstated essentialist thinking and advocates “independent-spirited and sexually autonomous” women (Plant 2017, 92). Accordingly, characteristics of “womanist” revolve around integrity and autonomy, albeit in a culturally embedded way. In fact, she reaches back to one of her womanist forebears, Zora Neale Hurston, who identified herself as “the cosmic Zora [. . .] belong[ing] to no race nor time,” as “the eternal feminine with its string of beads” (1979, 155). Similarly to Hurston’s universalist self-conception, who, at the same time, insisted on her femininity as well as cultural embeddedness and tradition as her reference to the “string of beads” suggests, Walker, too, identifies herself as a “traditionally universalist” (1983, xi).

Walker’s terminology suggests that womanism is historically present in the black community, describing black female identity and activity. From the point of view of womanist God-talk, it is reinforced by Delores S. Williams, who identifies two traditions in black religious thought. First, the “liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation” (Williams 1993, 2) emphasizes the redemptive power of the Bible for the enslaved and oppressed African Americans. Second, Williams identifies a “survival/quality-of-life tradition” (6), which centers around Hagar, the Egyptian female slave, Abraham’s second wife in Gen. 16, whose life situation and “survival resources” (198) parallel African American women’s:

Even today, most of Hagar’s situation is congruent with many African-American women’s predicament of poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homelessness, rape, motherhood, single-parenting, ethnicity and meetings with God. Many black women have testified that “God helped them ‘make a way out of no way.’ They believe God is involved not only in their survival” struggle, but that God also supports their struggle for quality of life, which “making a way” suggests. (5–6)

The tradition Williams accounts for can well be traced back to the female voice of black female preachers like Jarena Lee or Sojourner Truth—both early advocates of female rights in the 19th century—, or the black female autobiography such as Harriet Jacobs’s, serving as “means of unveiling and of protesting against the oppressed conditions of black women’s lives” (Moody 2001, 19). In their works, as in their lives, they contested both domestic and racial ideology (Haywood 2003, 15), i.e., “Even within their own immediate black communities and institutions [. . .] the women confronted class, race,

and gender ideologies shaped to make preaching or independent missionary work very difficult for them” (15).

Hagar’s story reveals the positioning of the black female as defenseless, subjugated by male and female oppressors, and generally displaced as incarcerated domestically or in different social settings, or cast out, i.e., excluded. Exclusion to the wilderness, however, also signifies a place, where displacement becomes a source of survival in that the desert or wilderness is situated outside the power framework, textualized as elsewhere (see Ardener 2012, 527), i.e., displacement is a negative space, where the power maneuvers do not penetrate the category, leaving it as is. For Hagar, the wilderness becomes a shelter from oppressive forces, gaining a chance to retextualize the wilderness as a place of inhabitation, i.e., a source of subjectivation:

The wilderness experience, as religious experience, was transforming. Its structure was physical *isolation* (of slave from slave environment); *establishing a relation* (between Jesus and slave); *healing by Jesus* (of whatever malady afflicted the slave); *transformation* (conversion of the slave’s more secular bent to a thoroughly religious bent); and *motivation to return* (to the slave community) changed for the better. (Williams 1993, 113)

The stages of transvaluation—Niebuhr’s Nietzschean term also used by James Cone to refer to the change of consciousness and empowerment (2011, 34)—result in inverting the desert by Hagar and the wilderness by African American women with the effect that the oppressive constraints wear off and the new self’s integrity is achieved.

The wilderness experience can be appropriated in an abstract sense, meaning that any spiritual trial implicates one, or America is a wilderness; however, it proves important to establish that the wilderness is environment elsewhere as for Harriet Jacobs, i.e., a place to escape to (see Millner 107); or at hand, denoting *différance*, as in the case of Walker’s gardens “so brilliant with colors, so original in [their] design, so magnificent with life and creativity” (1983, 241) which signify a “systematic play of differences” (Derrida 1981, 37) both as the negation of dehumanization by white social space and as part of a deviant “logic of supplementarity” (Norris 1982, 49, 152). It represents the transforming power of the female soul, performing what Katie Cannon emphasizes in religious terms, “The slave woman’s religious consciousness provided her with irrepressible talent in humanizing her environment” (1995, 48).

In womanist theology, the environment has become to represent the place where womanist subjectivity can unfold, especially as it proved “as a place of refuge from the horrors and strictures of slave life” (Blum 2002, 251). Initially womanist theology addressed issues revolving around sexism and classism—problem areas that black theology and feminist theology failed to deal with or with inadequate detail to the needs of black women (Townes 2006, 1165). However, it included apparently little about the natural environment and environmental concern. In the early works by Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores S. Williams, sites, nevertheless, such as the garden appear as places of individual enrichment representing matrifocal genealogy. For Cannon, family “narratives are the soil where my inheritance from my mother’s garden grew” (1995, 28). The trope of the garden represents the inner sanctum of African American culture, the nurturing context for the black female subject. Ecological thinking appears in Grant’s theologizing, who in explaining the liberation feminist’s, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s theology asserts,

The tendency of human beings to pollute the environment is seen as in keeping with these other oppressive tendencies [. . .] Resolution of the problem involves not only the re-ordering of relationships between human beings but also the re-ordering of relationships with non-human realities. [. . .] In this context, all relationships of domination between races, sexes, classes, environment and human beings are broken down. What is created is the kind of communal equalitarianism required for a new woman, a new humanity, a new heaven, and a new earth. (1989, 137)

As is later theorized by black theologians like Cone (see his “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” [2000]) and ecowomanist theologians, the core problem of the Anthropocene lies in oppression and domination, albeit they are exerted against women by white oppressors, black males, and institutions like the black church (Williams 1993, 206). To break the cycle, Grant envisions social activism, i.e., she moves beyond the individual to the communal, to effect a non-hierarchical societal context—a society inclusive of blacks and women but restricted to their discourse:

As consciousnesses are raised women will have to engage in social praxis in order to reconstruct society in an egalitarian way. [. . .] However, they need to do this and at the same time employ self-criticism to move beyond racial and class narrowness. The self-examination and criticism also must be extended beyond human relationship to our relationship to the environment—that is, ecology. (1989, 130)

Importantly, Grant's womanist theology calls for concerted action from her own womanist position but with other (white) feminist theologians—a move that is still fathomed with difficulty by Cone's black (male) theology two decades later.

In early (systematic) womanist theology, it is Williams, for whom the natural environment signifies clearly the site of encounter with God for the individual seeker, much like in the folk-religious vision quests in the process of getting through religion described by Zora Neale Hurston (1981, 85). For Williams, the "Hagar-in-the-wilderness figure" (1993, 117) carries the promise of "survival, freedom and nationhood" (118) upon returning/re-emerging from nature. The wilderness is "an environment supporting solitude and reflection [where] God-human encounter could happen undisturbed by competing forces in the environment" (112–113). The natural space void of hegemonic socio-cultural discourses granted the silence needed for self-reflection. In discussing white perception of the wilderness—hostile and uncivilized in the pioneers' view—Williams alludes to ecological implications of breaking the land and people: "Transforming the wilderness not only meant dealing with the natural environment; it also meant civilizing 'savage' humans associated with the wilderness" (114). Extending her reasoning in an analogous manner means that "Genocide of these women and men [as], for the Euro-Americans, the proper strategy for subduing wilderness people" (114) implicates the genocide of the land itself since "Uncultivated land [. . .] was absolutely useless" (qtd. in Williams 1993, 114).

Williams powerfully establishes a binary between the Euro-American and African American understanding of the natural environment. In claiming an Africanist heritage, which entails the view even of landed property as "closely tied to a mental map of spiritual territories" (Lentz 2013, 127), she embeds black Americans in a nature-inferred discourse that stands in a sharp contrast to white American conceptualizations of nature:

Possibly the slave's positive attitude toward the wilderness was also influenced by various African traditions, which regarded many aspects of nature as friendly and nature itself as a sustainer of life. Perhaps some of the African and animistic ways of thinking about nature were, in one form or another, passed down by generation after generation of slaves. Though many slaves were familiar with the Bible, apparently they did not take seriously those parts that told man he had dominion over nature. Nor did they translate this to mean conquering the wilderness as the American pioneer did. More similar to Romanticism's understanding of the wilderness as good and beautiful, the slaves—perhaps before Romanticism

flourished in America and contrary to the pioneers' ideas—respected the integrity of nature and the wilderness. (Williams 1993, 116)

Symbiotic coexistence with nature, embeddedness rather than superimposition over the natural world, and non-hierarchical, egalitarian, as well as communal deployment of the African American subject suggest that African American slaves maintained their cosmological worldview and syncretically adapted it to Christianity. Not taking the Bible seriously must then have meant that African Americans interpreted the world around them not as they were told since it would have meant accepting their own place in that world through mediation, but appropriated the biblical message with agency. The view of nature in Williams's theoretical framework is reminiscent of Africana womanism, which posits that “the Africana woman comes from a legacy of fulfilling the role of supreme Mother Nature—nurturer, provider, and protector” (Hudson-Weems 1993, 72), simultaneously “establishing her cultural identity, [and] relat[ing] directly to her ancestry and land base—Africa” (22).

The intertwining between nature, culture, and womanism comes to the foreground in ecowomanism, expressing “the spiritual intimacy that many descendants of Africa have with the earth today” (Harris 2017, 4) while also acknowledging the “ecological burden-and-beauty paradox” (Ruffin 2010, 2) due to the disrupting racial history in the United States. In her book, *Ecowomanism*, Melanie L. Harris connects “the unjust treatment of women of African descent [with] the unjust treatment of the body of the earth” (2017, 79), combining ecological thinking and womanist traditions to foster environmental justice work. Racial and earth injustices are viewed in an intersection to study “the damning effects earth injustice can have on people of color, the earth, and *all* people living with the earth” (84). Religious in nature, ecowomanist inquiries address thus ecoinjustices by understanding the earth as sacred and, in this way, the disrupted relation between humans and nature as desecration.

The womanist lens Harris employs contains essentially African American and African cultural elements, which may implicate, what Patricia Hill Collins identifies regarding womanism, black nationalist assumptions blocking interracial cooperation (1996, 10–11). However, ecowomanism echoes rather “a pluralist version of black empowerment” (11)—another tenet of womanism Collins calls attention to—referring to the idea that “[b]y retaining black cultural distinctiveness and integrity, pluralism offers a modified version of racial integration premised not on individual

assimilation but on group integration" (11). It identifies the background of Harris's philosophy entailing also a non-theistic womanist humanism (building on Anthony Pinn's concept of an atheistic/churchless/nontheistic humanism in *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* [1995, 148–49]) but it is also strategically deployed as she opens in this way toward pan-Africanist inclusion, and even, based on her humanism, to other faiths and humanisms (Harris 2007, 396–98).

The inclusive notion prevails in works by other ecotheological thinkers. Dianne Glave emphasizes a transatlantic continuity in the way African Americans are attached to the land: "From ancient Africa to the modern-day United States, people of African descent have continued the legacy of their relationship with the land" (2010, 3). The rootedness projects "a quasi-African sacred cosmos" (Carr-Hamilton 1996, 76), which influences African American relation to the environment. It palpably comes to the foreground in Glave's discussion of the relevance of gardens for black women, which testify about survival skills on both physical and spiritual levels, as they crystalize as means of subsistence and *lieu de memoir*. Their gardens "mimicked nature and rejected white control" (2010, 117).

Much as gardens entail gender, racial, and economic discourses as well, it may be argued that gardens have served for African American women to find proper self-identification through identification with the natural environment. "Rootedness in earth" has enabled them to construct individual and communal identities—self-empowerment that underlies ecowomanist ecojustice engagement. The inherent trait of ecowomanism emanates from the identification with the natural environment as a way of resisting white oppression including environmental racism. Based on their ecology, "African Americans have continued their legacy of resistance, combining grassroots activism, spirituality, and organization to craft a 'spearhead for reform' that African Americans who continue to be embattled by environmental racism can carry into the future" (Glave 2010, 138). With this background, ecowomanists have been targeting African American exposure to "toxic chemicals, waste, and environmental devastation caused by nature" (138).

In fact, the ecological notion can be seen as bringing together the interpretation of the garden as self-expression and that of the wilderness as the place of ongoing creation, or free(d) space to expand the horizon of engagement in a related way. Gardening as cultivating the environment becomes then for ecowomanists a self-expressive, vernacular, yet communal, i.e., embedded mode of dwelling in the world. Just as the process of creation

is viewed as good, which evokes an ethical demand not to misuse and corrupt it but to see and appreciate its goodness, instilling “hope for justice” (Kebaneilwe 2015, 701), gardening turns into a restorative and reconstructive activity of sustainability. As Richard Noble Westmacott claims in connection with vernacular gardening, “Gardening is an adaptation of nature, and for gardening to become indigenous to a society, it must be sustainable” (1992, 110). Just as vernacular gardens need to be sustainable, ecowomanist thinking insists that ecological gardening is to be understood in the face of the intersections of manifold interdependencies stemming from the race-gender-class defilement and denotes an activity to counteract these to effect sustainability not merely ecologically, but also one based on cultural diversity and continuity.

The duality of ecological and existential thinking to be explored by later ecowomanist thinkers is already there initially in Walker’s philosophy when she defines womanist as “both spiritual and concrete and it would have to be organic, characteristic, not simply applied” (1983, 81) and describes her experience of her mother’s dynamic engagement in her garden as:

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbenas . . . and on and on. [. . .] I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. (1983, 241)

Ecological sustainability emerges as cultural and spiritual sustainability for her and ecowomanists to come as the active engagement in nature and in the community through nature is an existential and spiritual necessity. The diversity in nature in Walker’s perception reflects the cultural diversity of the black community with the personal nurturing the communal and the communal shaping the personal. The interdependence and interrelation of nature, the community, and the individual underlie the sustainability based on cultivation as creation, i.e., being.

In conclusion, ecowomanism describes womanist spirituality tightly connected to nature in that it interprets black female subjectivity in/through nature and through the performative activity of gardening as creative as in self-creating since ecowomanists are able in this way to counteract the

race-gender-class triad also polluting nature; and as in co-creating so that participation in the on-going creation sets an ecological imperative for action to implement environmental justice. Layli Maparyan's definition of womanist spirituality as "eclectic, synthetic, holistic, personal, visionary, and pragmatic" (2012, 87) shows that the nature-induced womanism as both spirituality and praxis reflecting ages-old Motherwit enables habitation in a unique way and, turning nature into a place of implosive tactics, it endows ecowomanists with agency to take action in the world.

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